

A Prophet and a Mystic by Albert Nolan O.P.¹

In their speculations about who Jesus was, his contemporaries agreed that, whatever else, he was a prophet (Mk 8:27-28 par; Lk 7:16). Some might have thought that he was a false prophet, but he clearly spoke and acted like a prophet. And that is surely how Jesus saw himself (Lk 4:24). He does not seem to have ever contradicted anyone who referred to him as a prophet. In its basic inspiration, therefore, Jesus' spirituality was like that of the Hebrew prophets.

Speaking Out

Prophets are people who speak out when others remain silent. They criticize their own society, their own country, or their own religious institutions. Those who criticize hostile nations or foreign religions are not called prophets. True prophets are men and women who stand up and speak out about the practices of their own people and their own leaders – while others remain silent.

This leads inevitably to tension and even some measure of conflict between the prophet and the establishment. In the Hebrew Scriptures we see how the prophets clashed with kings and sometimes priests too. Jesus was painfully aware of this tension or conflict in the traditions of the prophets. *"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you... for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets"* (Lk 6:22, 23 par). Jesus saw those who killed the prophets in the past as the ancestors or predecessors of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23:29-35).

The tension or conflict is between authority and experience. True prophets are not part of the authority structure of their society or their religious institution. Unlike priests and kings, prophets are never appointed, ordained, or anointed by the religious establishment. They experience a special calling that comes directly from God, and their message comes from their experience of God: *"Thus says the Lord God."*

We have seen how boldly and radically Jesus spoke out against the assumptions and practices of the social and religious establishment of his time. He turned their world upside down. The conflict that this created became so intense that in the end they killed him to keep him quiet.

Any attempt to practice the same spirituality as Jesus would entail learning to speak out boldly as he did - and facing the consequences.

Reading the Signs

Prophets are typically people who can foretell the future, not as fortune-tellers, but as people who have learned to read the signs of their times. It is by focusing their attention on, and becoming fully aware of, the political, social, economic, military, and religious tendencies of their time that prophets are able to see where it is all heading.

Reading the signs of his times would have been an integral part of Jesus' spirituality.

In the first place, like many of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus must have seen the threatening armies of a powerful empire on the horizon - in this case the Roman Empire. Imperial power was well known to the prophets. At one time or another the people of Israel had been oppressed by the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Greeks. The prophets warned against collaborating with these power structures and promised that each of them would one day decline and fall - which they did. In this the prophets saw the finger of God.

In Jesus' view, it would only be a matter of time before the Roman armies felt sufficiently provoked to attack and destroy Jerusalem. *"When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near"* (Lk 21:20). *"Indeed the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to*

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the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another” (Lk 19:43-44).

For most Jews, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem would mean the destruction of their worship, their culture, and their nation. Jesus’ concern was not for the future of the temple but for the people of Jerusalem, especially the women and children who would suffer so much at the hands of the Romans (Lk 19:44; 21:21-24). But Jesus knew, as the Hebrew prophets had known, that all empires come and go. *“Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles (Romans) until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled”* (Lk 21:24).

What Jesus must also have seen was the spiral of violence in which the Galilean peasants were caught up. Recent studies have made us aware of the peasant society in which Jesus lived and of the fact that Jesus himself would have been indeed a peasant. Artisans like carpenters and fishermen were also peasants. Peasants were not only poor, they were exploited and oppressed; and not only by the Romans but also by the Herods and the rich landowners. They were so heavily taxed that they almost inevitably ended up in debt. As their plight continued to worsen, what developed was a spiral of violence. Peasants and artisans would try to resist their exploitation. The result would be violent repression, which in turn would lead to revolt, giving rise to even more repression.

Jesus, reading the signs of the times from the perspective of a Galilean peasant, would have seen that this spiral of violence held no hope for the poor and the oppressed. The people were powerless and helpless. Was it in reference to the peasants of Galilee that we are told that he saw the crowds as *“harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”* (Mt 9:36). The experience of insecurity led to an upsurge in religious fervor: new movements, new sects, and new ideas. The people were desperate to know what God was going to do and what God wanted them to do. While this was not quite the same as today’s hunger for spirituality, it was a desperate search for God.

Observing the pain and suffering of the peasants and other poor people who were becoming poorer every day and crying out for their daily bread, shocked by the hypocrisy and self-righteousness of so many religious leaders, moved by the “lost-ness” and brokenness of many sincere people, Jesus seems to have decided that what the people needed was healing. And there were signs that this was already taking place.

When John the Baptist’s disciples ask Jesus what is happening, he says: *Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them.* (Mt 11:4-5)

The successful work of healing among the poor and the encouraging news of God’s love that Jesus himself brings to the peasants and beggars is the outstanding sign that something new is being born. It is what was foretold by Isaiah (29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1-2) and it augurs well for the future. Nor is it only Jesus who is doing this. His disciples as well as others from outside their circle are also busy with this great work (Lk 9:49-50 par).

In these hopeful signs, and possibly many others, Jesus sees the finger of God. And if it is indeed the Work of God *“then the kingdom of God has come to you”* (Lk 11:20 par). In other words, God’s reign has begun.

God’s Messenger

Jesus spoke, as most prophets do, for or on behalf of God. In fact he seems to have done so more confidently and boldly than any other prophet. He does not preface his message with words like: *“The Lord God says.”* He simply announces his message with: *“But I say to you.”*

Where did Jesus derive this unshakeable assurance that he could speak so directly for God? *“Where did this man get this wisdom?”* his contemporaries ask (Mt 13:54). After all, Jesus is just a peasant from an unimportant Galilean village called Nazareth.

Prophets experience not only a special calling from God, but also a special closeness to God that enables them to understand God's "feelings" and "thoughts" about what is happening or will happen in the future. It is this mystical experience of union with God that enables them to speak on God's behalf.

In reading the gospels, the general impression we get is that Jesus was very much a man of action: preaching, teaching, healing, and confronting the religious and political leadership. What we do not always notice is that behind, and in support of, all these activities was a life of constant prayer and profound contemplation.

One of the most consistent memories his disciples seem to have had of Jesus was of a person who was frequently wrapped in prayer. They often saw him praying. Sometimes he would just move a short distance away from them to pray (Mt 26:36; Lk 22:41; 11:1). They said that once while he was praying they saw his appearance change and his face shine (Mt 17:2 parr).

Jesus seems to have taken every possible opportunity of getting away to a quiet and lonely place for prayer and reflection. "*In the morning, while it was still very dark.*" Mark tells us, "*he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed*" (1:35 see also 6:46 and Lk 4:42). Luke says he did this regularly (5:16). Before choosing his twelve apostles, he spent the whole night in prayer, we are told (Lk 6:12). He recommended prayer in the privacy of one's room, because he had no time for those who "*love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others*" (Mt 6:5-6). He called such people hypocrites. We can be sure that he spent much time praying behind closed doors.

The Contemplative Years

Jesus was first and foremost a contemplative. His busy public life seems to have started at about the age of thirty, and to have lasted for no more than three years. The period before this is referred to as his "hidden" life. Hidden or not, I am sure that it was filled with prayer, contemplation, and agonizing discernment. How else would he have been able to act with such clarity and confidence during his short public life? He was fully human and therefore had to grow and develop over time like any other human being. As Luke puts it. "*Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature*" (Lk 2:52 NIV; see also Lk 2:40).

At some stage he must have learnt to read and write - in the synagogue, no doubt. Luke has him listening to the learned theologians of the time, the scribes, and asking them questions in the temple (Lk 2:41-50). In one way or another he must have spent years, many years, grappling with the meaning of the scriptures, with the signs of the times, and with what he himself might be called to be and to do.

One particularly important experience of God's love and God's call happened while he was at prayer after his baptism in the Jordan (Lk 3:21-22 parr). He felt that the Spirit of God had descended upon him like a dove and that he had been chosen to be a prophet or servant or son of God in some very special way.

We are told that Jesus spent forty days in the desert. The number forty is thematic. It echoes the Hebrew slaves' forty years in the desert. So perhaps Jesus spent even more than forty days in a deserted place. Whatever the case may be, he seems to have spoken of this period as a time of temptation when he struggled with God's will and the very nature of his calling (Lk 4:1-13; Mt 4:1-11). Was he to spend his life finding bread to feed the hungry (turning stones into bread)? Was he to take power and rule over Israel and the kingdoms of the world (as Satan promised)? Was he to do something sensational like jumping off the pinnacle of the temple to attract attention (hoping the angels would catch him)?

Can we see here Jesus' own struggle with his ego? The ego, as we have seen, is a false image of ourselves that we can identify with or reject as a temptation. Could Satan be the pre-modern way of thinking about what we today call our ego?

We can also surmise that during these more contemplative years Jesus was busy reading the signs of his times. As I pointed out in Jesus Before Christianity, when Herod arrested John the Baptist, Jesus

left the desert and the river Jordan, gave up baptizing people and started a dramatically new ministry of preaching and healing in Galilee - focusing on the poor, the sinners and the sick - the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Was this not the result of a contemplative re-interpretation of the signs of his times? What had now dawned was a new time, quite different from the time of John the Baptist?

In any case, Jesus' union with God was something he became more deeply conscious of as he grew in wisdom and stature over the years before beginning his public life. And while it would obviously not be possible for us to reconstruct this development of consciousness, there are some clues as to what his contemplative prayer and mysticism might have meant.

Jesus' Mysticism

Jesus was a mystic. "Mystics" and "mysticism" are not biblical words, but they express very well the experience that the biblical prophets seem to have had. The writings of the mystics can help us to interpret the religious experiences of the prophets and in particular Jesus' exceptionally profound experience of oneness with God. All mystics speak about an experience of union or oneness with God.

Jesus' unique oneness with God has been the subject of centuries of theological debate and of doctrinal and creedal definition. This is not our concern here. Our search is for some clues to the way Jesus might have experienced his oneness with God.

Scholars today would speak of Jesus' experience of union with God as his *abba* experience, his experience of God as his loving Father. Other mystics describe their experience in terms of marriage and sexual union or giving birth to the Son of God or losing oneself and merging with God or with the Absolute. Jesus experienced it as a father-son or parent-child relationship.

All mystics tell us that the words or images we use to describe union with God are inadequate. Nothing can ever convey the wordless, imageless experience of union with God. Nevertheless, we need to use words or metaphors, inadequate they may be, to speak about this most profound of human experiences. Jesus did it by speaking to God and about God as his *abba*.

One of the strongest memories Jesus' disciples had of him was that he addressed God with a familiar family word *abba* rather than any sacred religious word, and that he taught his disciples to do the same. This was so striking and unconventional that the original Aramaic word used by Jesus was sometimes preserved alongside the Greek in the New Testament, as in "*abba Father*" (Mk 14:36; Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). As a way of addressing and referring to God, it was unique.

In terms of our attempt to understand Jesus' spirituality, the significance of his use of the term *abba* is not that it is masculine or that it is the word a child might use, but that it expresses intimacy; God is being spoken of as a loving parent who embraces, holds, and protects his or her child. And, like the love of any good parent, it is warm, unconditional, and totally dependable. Some might associate this more with a caring mother than with a father, although warm, caring fathers are not un-common these days nor were they in the past.

Still more revealing than his use of the word *abba* is Jesus' description of the loving father in the parable of the prodigal son. This father rejoices at the return of his lost child, gives no thought to punishment or retribution, and does not want to hear anything about his son's debauchery and waste of money. The spontaneous reaction of this *abba* is unconditional forgiveness.

Jesus saw himself as the son who learned by imitating his Father. He learned to forgive unconditionally as God does. He learned to be compassionate as his Father was compassionate (Lk 6:36). Because his Father makes the sun shine and the rain fall on the just and the unjust, Jesus learned to love the just and the unjust, including his enemies and those who persecuted him (Mt 5:44-45 par).

If we find it difficult to take Jesus seriously and to live as he lived, then it is because we have not yet experienced God as our *abba*. The experience of God as his *abba* was the source of Jesus' wisdom, his

clarity, his confidence, and his radical freedom. Without this it is impossible to understand why and how he did the things he did.

The Mystico-prophetic Tradition

Not so long ago there was a tendency to separate the spiritual from the political, prayer from work for justice, mysticism from prophetic action. Those who experienced a hunger for spirituality seemed to have no thirst for justice. Politics and the struggle for liberation were felt to be thoroughly mundane and unspiritual. On the other hand, those who were fired with a passion for justice and freedom often thought that resorting to prayer and mysticism was escapist individualism.

There were of course many remarkable exceptions – people who saw prayer and justice as two sides of the same coin. I think of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Helder Camara, Dorothee Soelle. Mahatma Gandhi, and numerous others of different faith traditions in South Africa and elsewhere. What interests us here is the powerfully simple way in which prophecy and mysticism form an inseparable whole in the life and spirituality of Jesus.

Today we call it the mystico-prophetic tradition. This term is being used more and more frequently in Christian theology and spirituality, not only as an attempt to overcome the antagonisms between the two in the recent past, but also as a way of recognizing that traditionally, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition, there was no such division or antagonism.

Prophets were mystics and mystics were prophets. Any idea that one could be a prophet calling for justice and social change without some experience of union with God was unthinkable. Equally unthinkable was any idea that one could be a perfectly good mystic without becoming critically outspoken about the injustices of one's time. We often forget that mystics from Basil the Great to Catherine of Siena spoke out boldly against the injustices of the rich, of the political powers, and of church leaders in their times.

These were people who took Jesus seriously and, like Jesus himself, they were rooted in a mystico-prophetic spirituality.

Institutional Authority

I have always felt that there were two histories of the Christian Church: the history of the institution with its popes and power struggles, its schisms, conflicts, and divisions, its heresy hunting and bureaucracy; and the parallel history of the martyrs, saints, and mystics with their devotion to prayer, humility, and self-sacrifice, their freedom and joy, their boldness and their deep love for everyone and everything. The latter we have come to refer to as the mystico-prophetic tradition, and the former I have chosen to call the tradition of institutional authority.

There has always been a certain amount of overlap between the two, but on the whole these two histories or traditions have run parallel to one another with no small measure of tension and conflict. We have seen how the Hebrew prophets were at loggerheads with religious and political authority, but the same can be said of saints and mystics. Even a cursory glance at Robert Ellsberg's All Saints, reveals the remarkable consistency with which the saints and mystics found themselves in conflict, or at least in a tense relationship, with the religious establishment of their time.

Mystics, like prophets, are not appointed by any religious authority to fulfill their role as mystics. The authority of saints, mystics, and prophets has always been based upon their holiness or closeness to God - their experience. And institutional authority has always found it difficult to deal with such freedom of the spirit.

Another notable characteristic of the mystical tradition has been the very large number of women who feature prominently in it, women who wrote extensively about their mystical experiences and acted as advisers and counselors to men and women of all kinds. We have only to think of great mystics like Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila. Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Mechthild of Magdeburg,

and Catherine of Genoa. On the other hand, the institution has remained solidly patriarchal. Those in authority have been, and still are, men.

What we need to notice about Jesus is that in the conflict between the mystico-prophetic tradition and institutional authority within the Judaism of his time, he was par excellence a representative of the mystico-prophetic tradition. He was not a priest or a scribe. He was a layman - and, to cap it all, a peasant. Institutional authority was represented by the scribes and the Pharisees, the chief priests and the elders, the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin.

But it would be wrong to think that Jesus rejected the religious institution of his time out of hand. He respected the institution as such, "*Moses' seat*" (Mt 23:2), and he can even be said to have loved all who were part of it. But he totally rejected the way it was being used and abused to oppress the people (Mt 23:3-4). This has been the role of the prophet and the mystic in all religions and faith traditions in all times and places ever since there were religious authorities of any kind.

Both the mystico-prophetic tradition and institutional authority can be misused. Institutional authority can be used to dominate and oppress. On the other hand, charlatans can pose as prophets, mystics, and saints.

Jesus was not an anarchist in the sense that he thought one could manage with no authority structure at all. He wanted to turn the whole religious establishment of his time on its head. And it was with this in mind that he began to build the kingdom-family of God as the new Israel with the new structure of twelve apostles. He seems to have wanted a structure that was more like a family, an egalitarian structure in which those who have authority exercise it as a service to others. When the twelve began to argue about who among them was the greatest, he told them not be like rulers who make their authority felt and lord it over others, but to be like servants who want to serve rather than to be served (Mk 10:42-45 parr). A mystico-prophetic spirituality has relevance also for those who find themselves in positions of authority.

A Mystico-prophetic Spirituality for Everyone

Anyone who wishes to take Jesus seriously would have to be prepared to become a prophet and a mystic. In the history of Israel before Jesus, prophets were rare individuals. Jesus' aim was to open up the spirit of prophecy to everyone. Anyone can and should read the signs of the times, just as anyone can read the sky and foresee tomorrow's weather (up to a point!) (Mt 16:1-4).

Then too we can all become courageous enough to speak out like prophets. This was the experience of the first Christians after Jesus' death. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and after was an outpouring of the spirit of prophecy. As Peter says in the Book of Acts (2:17) quoting the prophet Joel (2:28): "*In the last days... I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.*"

We can also become mystics. In fact, as we have seen, prophecy and mysticism go together. Mystical union with God is not an experience reserved for some very special and privileged people. It is true that everybody does not have the same opportunities for exploring such a possibility. But Jesus did not think that he alone could experience an intimacy with God as his *abba*. God was the *abba* and Father of all: "*My Father and your Father*" (Jn 20:17); "*Our Father*" (Mt 6:9 parr). We can all experience some measure of intimacy with God, as we shall see.

According to the frequently quoted prediction of the great twentieth-century theologian, Karl Rahner, "the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all".

How we get there is another matter.